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SUBJECT: KARBALA RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND STRUCTURE

This a a PRT Karbala Reporting Cable.

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¶1. (U) Summary: The imams of the al-Husayn and al-Abbas Shrines are the most-senior religious figures in Karbala. They were appointed by Iraq's highest Shi'a authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who delegates the selection of imams at other mosques and husayniyahs to a committee. Except at the province's handful of Sadrism mosques, all imams in Karbala are graduates from one of the 21 religious schools comprising the Hawza, or seminary center, in Najaf. Shi'a imams are government employees whose salaries are paid by the Awqaf Ministry out of donations received by the shrines. They are careful not to court controversy in their sermons. End Summary.

Two at the Top

¶2. (U) In response to recent queries from official visitors concerning the nature and structure of religious authority in Karbala, we have prepared the following primer. We canvassed a variety of contacts, official and unofficial, religious and secular, in compiling this report. We have eschewed sourcing attributions for the sake of brevity.

¶3. (U) Shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i, imam of the al-Husayn Shrine, and Shaykh Ahmad Jawad Nour al-Safi, imam of the al-Abbas Shrine, are the most-senior religious figures in Karbala. They were appointed by Iraq's highest Shi'a authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Each man is an ayatollah, one who has completed an extensive, prescribed course of religious instruction and examination, and each in public is addressed as shaykh, meaning master. Among intimates, however, they prefer to use the title imam, which in the Shi'a context encompasses the roles of prayer-leader and khateeb or orator (these generally are separate functions among Sunnis).

Becoming an Imam

¶4. (U) The al-Husayn and al-Abbas Shrines are not mosques. They are husayniyahs, or gathering places, where prayers may be offered. Although al-Karbala'i and Nour al-Safi are equal in terms of religious stature, the former - as the imam of the better-known and thus more visible of the twin shrines, generally is seen as the more authoritative. His sermons are broadcast weekly on radio and television. Al-Sistani is responsible for appointing the imams at the more than 100 mosques and husayniyahs in Karbala following the main, i.e. non-Sadrism, twelfth Shi'a line. These include the Mukhayyam Mosque (on the site where Husayn ibn Ali and his family camped prior to the Battle of Karbala in 680 C.E.) and the Ahmad bin Hashim Shrine (the burial place of one of Hassan ibn Ali's grandsons).

¶5. (U) In fact, however, al-Sistani appoints only the imams

of the al-Husayn and al-Abbas Shrines. He delegates the selection of the others to a committee made up of the heads of the 21 religious schools comprising the Hawza, or seminary center, in Najaf. All would-be, mainline imams are required to have graduated from one of these schools. (Note: Following a practice Christians of yore would recognize, prominent Karbala families such as the al-Awad, the al-Hur, the al-Qazwini and the al-Safi traditionally have sent their second-eldest sons to study at the Hawza. End Note.) The committee is chaired by Shaykh Bashir Husayn al-Najafi, who reestablished the Hawza beginning in 2003 (the schools of which had been destroyed by Saddam Husayn in the 1990s). Imams at the province's handful of Sadrism mosques and husayniyahs are appointed by Muqtada al-Sadr, and they generally have attended courses of study in Qom, Iran.

Money Matters

¶6. (U) Upon the recommendation of al-Najafi's committee, al-Sistani -- via the Marja'iyah -- submits a list of imam appointments to the Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments). Although the latter has the authority to reject appointees, it has yet to do so. Once the Ministry has approved the list, the newly minted imams become salaried employees of the Iraqi Government. Their appointments are temporary, generally for one year, after which their performance is reviewed by the Marja'iyah. If they receive satisfactory ratings, they become tenured, although subject to dismissal at any time upon al-Sistani's insistence.

¶7. (U) The funds from which the imams are paid come from

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donations given by pilgrims and visitors to Shi'a shrines throughout Iraq. The lion's share of donations -- some 60 percent -- is collected at the al-Husayn and al-Abbas Shrines. In monthly ceremonies, the imams -- along with representatives from the Marja'iyah, the Hawza, and the Awqaf Ministry -- open the gates of the tombs within each shrine. Inside they gather the money, jewelry and other valuables the faithful slip through the gilt latticework surrounding each of the tombs. The donations are counted and evaluated and then delivered to the Ministry in Baghdad. The Ministry redistributes the funds, apportioning salaries, maintenance costs, and other support to the mainline Shi'a mosques and husayniyahs based (in consultation with the Marja'iyah) on their prominence and requirements. A separate branch of the Ministry operates similarly with respect to Iraq's Sunni mosques. The Sadrism mosques and husayniyahs here rely on tithes from members of their congregations and, according to widespread-but-unsubstantiated rumors, support from Iran.

Self-Censorship

¶8. (U) There are no formal regulations governing what imams may or may not say or do in their mosques and husayniyahs. However, prior to their selection, would-be imams' views and proclivities are closely examined and those deemed unfit or likely to stray from the orthodoxy as established by al-Sistani are weeded out. Imams, particularly the recently appointed, are keenly sensitive to criticism and careful not to court controversy. Most consult with the Marja'iyah or with the offices of al-Karbala'i or Nour al-Safi when drafting sermons.

¶9. (U) As senior imams, al-Karbala'i and Nour al-Safi have more leeway within which to expound alternative points of view. However, because both men are potential successors to al-Sistani, they generally seek to avoid the appearance of disagreeing with him or with the Marja'iyah. Imams in the Sadrism mosques and husayniyahs, of course, feel no such compunction and frequently criticize the mainline clerics' timidity and ties to the government.

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